Buddhism as a Religion

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An Appreciation

In conjunction with the Centenary Celebration of the Sasana Abhiwurdhi Wardhana Society the Management Committee feels honoured to be able to publish this book which is based on a Dhamma talk entitled **"What is Buddhism?"**, delivered at the Buddhist Maha Vihara by the Most Venerable Dr. K. Sri Dhammananda Nayake Thera as part of a ten week course on World Religions.

In brief the contents of this publication are a simple exposition of Buddhism as a modern way of life by this highly qualified scholar who has a special gift to interpret the Dhamma to people from every walk of life.
The Sasana Abhiwurdhi Wardhana Society most humbly expresses its gratitude and pays tribute to the most Venerable for his indefatigable services in his exposition of the Dhamma and for rendering invaluable services to the cause of Buddhism for more than 42 years in this country as well as worldwide.

We are indeed proud to have been associated with someone of his calibre.

In conclusion, the Society wishes to express its sincere thanks to the Chief Venerable, Mr Vijaya Samarawickrama for the editor) al work and to Mr Ooi Chooi Seng for transcribing the talk from tape. Grateful thanks are also due to Ms Chong Hong Choo, Messrs. Jimmy C. S Lim, Alex Perera, Quah Swee Kheng, Eddy Yu Chen Lim and Bobby Sai for the invaluable services rendered in the publication of this book.

May they be well and happy!

Manoris H. Albert
President
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Since there are already so many religions in this world, why is it necessary for us to have another religion called Buddhism? Is there any extraordinary characteristic or contribution or significant feature that Buddhism has which other religions do not have? There is a school of thought which says that all religions are essentially the same. There are no significant differences. The only difference is in the interpretation and practice. After all, in the final analysis, all of us end in one place, either heaven or hell. That is the common belief of most religions. Does Buddhism share this viewpoint? To answer this question we have to examine what is meant by religion.

Definition

In the academic study of religion as a phenomenon in history the term '**religion**' can be considered in its different aspects: as an inner experience, as theology, or intellectual formulation of doctrine, as a basis or source of ethics and as an element in culture.

Different scholars have given different views and opinions of its nature and meaning. According to Aldous Huxley, religion is, among other things, a system of education, by means of which human beings may train themselves, first to make desirable changes in their own personalities and in society, and second, to heighten consciousness and so establish more adequate relations between themselves and the universe of which they are parts. Modern Indian philosophers like Dr. Radhakrishnan, have expounded the theme that religion is not a set of doctrines but that it is experience. And religious experience is based on the realisation of the '*presence of the divine in man* . 'H.G. Wells says '*religion is the central part of our education that determines our moral conduct'*. The German philosopher, Kant, stated that '*religion is the recognition of our moral principles as laws that must not be transgressed.*'

The Buddha's message as a religious way of life: "*Keeping away from all evil deeds, cultivation of life by doing good deeds and purification of mind from mental impurities.*" For our purposes, religion may be defined in a very broad sense as a body of moral and philosophical teachings and the acceptance with confidence of such teachings. In this sense, Buddhism is a religion.

Buddhism however does not neatly fit into the general categories outlined earlier because it does not share common features with other existing religions in many ways. To consider this matter further let us first of all briefly examine how religion could have come into being.

Beginnings

Why did religion originate? You might have heard that the origins of religion lie in man's fear, suspicion and insecurity. In the days before organised religions began, people did not have adequate knowledge and they could not understand the real nature of this life and what would happen to them after their deaths. They could not understand even the causes of natural phenomena or natural occurrences. According to their 'limited understanding, they suspected there must be certain unknown forces which created all these pleasant or unpleasant things. Eventually, they began to notice that there is an energy behind the forces of nature which they called '*shakti*'. They experienced an inexplicable sense of awe and dread towards these powers which they felt could harm them in some way. They therefore felt that these powers must be placated and used to protect or at least to leave them alone. Not trusting their ability to "talk" to these forces in ordinary language, they thought it would be more effective to mime their messages. Finally the actions to enlist the favour of these forces became ritualized into forms of worship. Some people were identified as having special powers to communicate with these forces and they enjoyed great power in the group.

After worshipping and praying, early men thought they could control the undesirable occurrences and at the same time ensure a degree of protection as reward from these unseen forces or energies. To help them better visualize what they were trying to communicate with, they gave each force a name and a form — either conceiving it in human or in grotesque non-human form, but always evoking a sense of awe and fear. As time went by, they forgot the original significance of these representations and took them for real and eventually accepted them as deities.

Different cultures translated ideas and concepts into physical form and developed particular rituals to honour and worship these images as gods. Later as early urban settlements began and social control became necessary certain

practices were used as the bases to develop moral behaviour and to guide citizens in the correct path to ensure the well being of the community. Thus developed concepts such as humanism, human responsibilities and human values such as honesty, kindness, compassion, patience, tolerance, devotion, unity and harmony. To ensure that these qualities would be further enhanced, the leaders instilled fear in the believers, threatening them with punishment by the gods in the life hereafter if they did not behave in an accepted manner. Religion was the result of the fusion of moral behaviour and belief in the supernatural. We will discuss Morality in greater detail later.

Concept of God

This is how imagination and humanism eventually fused together to become religion. Some people say that it is difficult to believe that any god created religion. Perhaps we could say that man created religion and later introduced the concept of a god into religion. An American philosopher, Prof. Whitehead, once stated that originally man created god and later god created man. What he meant was that the concept of god was created by man and later this concept was transformed into divinity. On the other hand, a French philosopher, Anatole France said that if the concept of god did not exist, some how or other, man would have created one because it is very important for his psyche. A divine power is necessary to allay our innate fear, suspicion, worries, disturbances, anxiety, craving. To avoid problems we depend on an external force to give us solace. Knowing the nature of the human mind, therefore, Anatole France said that if a god did not exist we would have to create one.

In this sense we are just like children. When a small baby is crying and the mother is too busy to carry it, what she does is to put a teat in its mouth to comfort it. That will stop the baby from crying. The concept of god helps many people in this manner, To stop their worries and dry their tears they develop various pacifiers in the form of religious beliefs and practices.

The Buddha

It was in a religious climate such as this that the Buddha appeared. As a prince living in the lap of luxury he started to think very deeply on why living beings suffer in this world. What is the cause

of this suffering? he asked. One day while he was sitting under a tree as a young boy, he saw a snake suddenly appear and catch a frog. As the snake and the frog were struggling, an eagle swooped down from the sky and took away the snake with the frog still in its mouth. That incident was the turning point for the young prince to renounce the worldly life. He began to think about how living beings on the earth and in the water survive by preying on each other. One life form tries to grab and the other tries to escape and this eternal battle will continue as long as the world exists. This never-ending process of hunting, and self preservation is the basis of our unhappiness. It is the source of all suffering. The Prince decided that he would discover the means to end this suffering.

Renunciation

He studied under various religious teachers and learnt everything they had to teach but was unable to discover how to end suffering. He spent many years pondering this question. Finally at the age of 29 he seriously contemplated on old age, sickness, death and freedom through renunciation, and decided that without giving up his worldly preoccupations and his responsibilities and pleasures it would be impossible for him to find the answer. That is why he had to leave the palace in what is known as "**The Great Renunciation**".
After struggling for six years, which represented the culmination of endless life cycles of cultivation and struggle for spiritual development, he finally gained enlightenment and understood the secret of our suffering. This was the beginning of another 'religious system'. But it was a religion like nothing anyone had known in the past. In fact many people today do not even like to call Buddhism a religion, because the word 'religion' evokes a great many negative emotions in their minds.

Beliefs and Practices in Ancient India

There was no reason at all for the Buddha to introduce another religion because at that time 2600 years ago there were already 62 religious cults in India alone. Since the existing religions during his time could not provide the answers to his questions he decided not to use the ingredients or concepts of these religions to introduce what he himself had realised.

What was the religious thinking in India at the time? "*God created everybody; god is responsible for everything; god will reward; god can forgive all our sins; and god is responsible for our lives after our death; god will send us to heaven or he will send us to hell*".

These are the basic ingredients of all religions even today. At the same time there were certain other religions also in India which taught that it was necessary for believers to torture their physical bodies, thinking that they could wash away all their sins during their lifetimes so they could go to heaven after death. Another religious group encouraged religious rites and rituals and ceremonies and animal sacrifices to please their gods. This group believed that through these practices they could go to heaven. Some others again introduced prayer and worship and asked forgiveness for the sins committed. The Buddha did not recognise the efficacy of all these practices.

Did The Buddha Make Any Promise?

The Buddha did not promise heavenly bliss and rewards to those who called themselves his followers nor did he promise salvation to those who had faith in him. To him religion was not a bargain but a noble way of life to gain enlightenment and salvation. The Buddha did not want followers with blind faith; he wanted human beings to think and understand. Buddhism is a noble path for living where humanism, equality, justice and peace reign supreme. Revengefulness, animosity, condemnation and resentment are alien to the Teaching.

The world is indebted to the Buddha for the rise of rationalism as a protest against the superstitions of religion. It is he who emancipated man from the thraldom of the priests. It is he who first showed the way to free man from the coils of hypocrisy and religious dictatorship.

During the Buddha's time no religious practice was considered higher than the rites, rituals and sacrifice of living beings to the gods; but to the Buddha no practice could be more humiliating or degrading to man. A sacrifice is nothing more than bribery; and salvation won by bribery and corruption is not a salvation which any self-respecting man would care to get.

Religious Terminology

But in introducing his doctrine, the Buddha did use the existing religious terms current in India at the time because in this way he would be on familiar ground with his listeners. They would grasp what he was alluding to and then he could proceed to develop his original ideas from this common ground.

Dharma, Karma, Nirvana , Moksha, Niraya, Samsara, Atma are some words which were common to all religious groups during his time. But in his teaching the Buddha gave very rational and unique meanings and interpretations to those existing religious terms.

Dharma

Let us take a look at the word dharma (or dhamma). for example. The ancient interpretation given to the word dharma is that it is a law given by the god. According to ancient belief the god promised to appear from time to time to protect this dharma by taking different incarnations. The Buddha did not accept that any god could have given doctrines and commandments and religious laws. The Buddha used the word dharma to describe his entire teaching. Dharma means that which holds up, upholds, supports.

The Buddha taught the dharma to help us escape the suffering caused by existence and to prevent us from degrading human dignity and descending into lower states such as hell, animal, the spirit or ghost or devil realms. The dharma introduced by the Buddha holds and supports us, and frees us from the misery of these realms. It also means that if we follow the methods he advocates we will never get into such unfortunate circumstances as being born blind, crippled, deaf, dumb or mad. So in the Buddha's usage, dharma is the advice given to support us in our struggle to be free from suffering and also to upgrade human values. Western philosophers describe Buddhism as a noble way of life or as '*a religion of freedom and reason*'.

The Dharma is not an extraordinary law created by or given by anyone. Our body itself is Dharma. Our mind itself is Dharma; the whole universe is Dharma. By understanding the nature of the physical body and the nature of the mind and worldly conditions we realize the Dharma. The Buddha taught us to understand the nature of our existence rationally in a realistic way. It concerns

the life, here and now, of each sentient being and thus interrelatedly of all existence.

Usually when people talk about religion they ask, "**What is your faith**?" They use the word "faith." The Buddha was not interested in the development of "faith" in an absolute sense, although it can be useful in the preliminary stages of one's religious development. The danger of relying on faith alone without analytical knowledge is that it can make us into religious fanatics. Those who allow faith to crystallize in their minds cannot see other peoples' point of view because they have already established in their minds that what they believe is alone the truth. The Buddha insisted that one must not accept even his own Teachings on the basis of faith alone. One must gain knowledge and then develop understanding through study, discussion, meditation and finally contemplation. Knowledge is one thing, understanding is another. If there is understanding one can adjust one's life according to changing circumstances based on the knowledge one has. We may have met learned people who know many things but are not realistic because their egoism, their selfishness, their anger, their hatred do not allow them to gain unbiased mental attitudes and peace of mind. When it is necessary to compromise, we must know how to compromise. When it is necessary to tolerate, we must know how to tolerate. When it is necessary to stand firm we must stand firm, with dignity.

Karma

Let us take another example, the word karma (or kamma). It simply means action. If a person commits a bad karma it will be impossible for that person to escape from its bad effect. Somehow or other he or she must face the consequences that will follow. According to ancient belief there is a god to operate the effect of this karma. God punishes according to one's bad karma; god rewards according to one's good karma. The Buddha did not accept this belief. He said there is no being or force which handles the operation of the effects of karma. Karma itself will yield the result, as a neutral operation of the law of cause and effect. He said we can avoid and, in some cases, even overcome the effect of karma if we act wisely. He said we must never surrender ourselves fatalistically thinking that once we have done bad action there can be no more hope. Other religions teach that god can negate the effect of karma through forgiveness if the followers

worship and pray and sacrifice. But the Buddha teaches that we have to effect our salvation by our own effort and mental purity.

"The Buddha can tell you what to do but he can not do the work for you." You have to do the work of salvation yourself. The Buddha has clearly stated that no one can do any thing for another for salvation except show the way. Therefore we must not depend on god, and not even depend on the Buddha. We must know what are the qualities, duties, and responsibilities of being a human being. He said that if we have committed certain bad karma, we should not waste precious energy by being frustrated or disappointed in our effort to put it right.

The first thing to do is to firmly resolve to stop repeating such bad karma by realising the harm it can do. The second thing is to cultivate more and more good karma. Thirdly, we must try to reduce evil thought, selfishness, hatred, anger, jealousy, grudges, and ill-will. In this way we can reduce the bad effect of the bad karma that we commit. This is the Buddha's method for overcoming the bad effects. He did not say we must pray to and worship him and that he would forgive all our sins.

Purity and impurity of our mind depend on ourselves. Neither god, Buddha, nor human being can pollute or purify one's mind. I cannot create impurity in your mind, I cannot purify your mind. But by taking my word or my action you create either purity or impurity within yourself. Outsiders cannot do anything for your mind if your mind is strong enough to resist it. That is why knowledge and understanding are important.

The Buddha taught that what man needs for his happiness is not a religion or a mass of theories but an understanding of the cosmic nature of the universe and its complete operation according to the laws of cause and effect. Until this fact is fully understood, man's understanding of life and existence will remain imperfect and faulty. '*The path that the Buddha showed us is, I believe, the only path humanity must tread if it is to escape disaster*'

Jawaharlal Nehru

Nirvana

The Buddha never claimed to have created the Dharma. What he discovered was the universal truth of the real nature of existence. In fact some

religious terms were already well known in India at that time. But the Buddha's uniqueness is that he took existing concepts and gave them very refined meanings and much deeper significance.

For example, before the Buddha's time, "*Nirvana*" (or *Nibbana*) simply meant peace or extinction. But he gave it entirely new dimensions of meaning. NI means "no" and VANA means "craving": No more craving, no more attachment and no more selfishness. We cannot experience Nirvana because we have craving, attachment and selfishness. When we get rid of these defilements we can experience Nirvanic bliss. It is difficult to experience true bliss because we have emotions and we crave for sensual gratification. So long as we live entangled in this world of sensual pleasures we will never experience true happiness. Of course it is true that we experience some kind of happiness in life but it cannot be termed "happiness" in the absolute sense of the word because it is not permanent.

We cannot gain bliss by harbouring anger or hatred, selfishness or delusion. Occasionally, we do experience certain degrees of emotional satisfaction, but the nature of this happiness is just like lightning, it is fleeting. It appears for a moment and disappears the next. True bliss is not like this. If there is true bliss we will experience a permanent sense of calmness, satisfaction and tranquillity. So the real purpose of our lives should be to purify our clouded, deluded, misled minds and free ourselves from worries and disturbances. So long as we spend our time constantly solving problems, always looking over our shoulders, always wondering what to do next, we can never be at peace.

Develop the Mind

The Buddha's advice is that we should be free from these distractions if we want to experience bliss. This release must however be obtained by our own effort and come from within ourselves. We cannot gain salvation from a god or the Buddha or from heaven. We cannot get ultimate freedom through external agents. Supernatural beings cannot help us to gain wisdom and final liberation no matter how much we worship them or praise them through penances, charms, mantras, incantations and invocations and animal sacrifices.

"*We are the results of what we were and we will be the results of what we are.*" Actions condition our happiness or unhappiness and finally secure our salvation. Salvation or deliverance is an

individual affair, just as each human being has to eat, drink and digest and sleep for himself. All karmic actions are maintained as part of our mental formations and remain there submerged. We remain oblivious of these past actions because the other mental activities cloud the mind which therefore cannot recall actions in the past. When we develop our minds through meditation we arrest the distractions provided by the five senses. When the mind is clear it reduces anxiety, craving, anger, jealousy and delusion. The mind that is clear becomes energetic and alert. This is when we can influence the mental activities and release enormous latent power. This is psychic power. It is present in all of us: we only have to learn to release it through meditation. Another way of reaching the deposited mental activities is by hypnotism. Through hypnotism some people have developed a degree of psychic power, but it is not recommended because hypnotism depends on another agent and does not effect purification of the mind.

The Buddha advised his followers to cultivate and develop the latent power within them and showed them how to make the best use of their will-power and intelligence without being slaves to an unknown being to find eternal happiness. Without blaming anybody else, Buddhism also teaches that man is responsible for his own action. Man should face the facts of life, and shoulder the responsibilities of life by fulfilling his duties and obligations to himself as well as to others. His pain and pleasure are created by himself and he has the ability to get rid of his sufferings and maintain peace and happiness by under-standing his weaknesses and using his own effort to overcome them. Man's untrained mind is responsible for all the troubles, calamities, disturbances, unfavourable circumstances and even the changes of elements and matter. Conversely man's mind can change unfortunate situations in the world and also can make it a peaceful, prosperous and happy place for all to live. This can be done only through the purification of mental energy.

The Buddha's Method

The Buddha's technique of teaching was different from that of the others. He never gave prepared "public talks" or "lectures." He always decided on a topic based on an immediate incident or observation. One of the marks of the Buddha's genius and his skill as a teacher was his well-tried

pedagogical practice of proceeding from the "known to the unknown." For example on one occasion as he and his followers were walking along a river bank he noticed a piece of wood floating downstream. He stopped and asked, "What do you think of that piece of wood? What will happen to it?" One disciple answered, "It may land on an island in the middle of the river"; others said, "It may get saturated with water and sink"; "People will take it and cut it up for firewood" and "It will complete its journey to the sea." Now who is correct? Who can accurately predict the fate of the piece of wood? The Buddha then explained that our life is just like a piece of wood floating downstream, full of uncertainty. No one can say what will happen to us the next day or the next month. His method was to take lessons from everyday life so that his teachings were always rooted in the here and now and totally relevant to human experience.

In this way, he gave due credit to human beings to think freely, by using their common sense. He did not introduce a religion to be practised slavishly out of fear and craving for any worldly gain.

According to the Buddha a beautiful thought and word which is not followed by corresponding action is like a bright flower that has no scent and will bear no fruit.

The eightfold path introduced by the Buddha is a planned course of inward culture and progress. By merely resorting to external worship, ceremonies and prayers, one can never make progress in righteous-ness and inner development. Mere prayer for salvation, the Buddha says, is like "asking the farther bank of a river to come over so that one may get to the other side without personal effort."

Self-Discovery

Many religions claim that messages were revealed to mankind by a god. However some rationalists ask, if there is only one god, and he had given his message for the benefit of all mankind, why are there so many different beliefs in the world? If the message was meant for the whole of the human race what was the difficulty for the god to announce his message publicly so that there would be no room for doubt or misinterpretation? Everybody would accept the message and there would be no religious friction and the whole world could just follow the one message of the god.

Many years ago, there was a religious seminar at the University of Malaya. There were five speakers, one from each religion. After they had talked, one student asked, "*When we study our religion we get some information about this world and the universe and life. When we study science we get entirely different information. This information contradicts our religious concepts. So 1 do not know what to accept, the teaching of my religion or the teaching of science*."

One of the speakers replied, "*Well I believe that god gave his doctrines in' the form of a message to one man who then spread it to others, so we must believe the word of god*."

But the student persisted, "*How do you know that the people to whom this message was conveyed understood it correctly? Could it not have been distorted and misinterpreted in their minds and then passed on to posterity*?"

The Buddha on the other hand never claimed anything like receiving knowledge from outside sources. Throughout his ministry he always asserted that his listeners were free to question him and challenge his teachings so that they could personally realize the truth. He said, "*Come and see*" (*Ehipassiko*). He did not say "*Come and believe*."

Whenever he spoke anything, it was because he had personally tested the validity of the saying for himself as an ordinary human being. He claimed no divinity. He understood everything because he knew how he had to suffer during so many previous births for all the bad deeds he had committed through ignorance. He had learned the hard way. He advised his followers through his own experience. He had done tremendous service to mankind by practising and observing the great (perfections) PARAMIS over countless lifetimes and finally experienced the supreme bliss. We have to ask ourselves which is more reliable, the testimony of one who speaks from personal experience or that of one who claims to have heard it from someone else who is always invisible.

Freedom of Thought

The Buddha's advice was not to depend on theories, on cults and gurus. In fact, at all times we must remain masters of ourselves through self-reliance. We must never surrender our dignity or freewill. The Buddha strongly advocated the doctrine of self-reliance, purity, courtesy, enlightenment, peace and universal love. He

stressed the need for understanding because without it, psychic insight leading to wisdom cannot be obtained. He says "If you wish to see the end of your suffering and fear, develop discipline, compassion and wisdom." We must always allow our minds the freedom to think and understand without depending on external influence. Those who depend on others are like small children. We must follow the example of the Buddha who said that when he was meditating to gain enlightenment no gods came to whisper in his ear to reveal hidden secrets of spiritual power. No one gave him any commandments or religious laws to introduce. He said, "I never had any teacher or divinity to teach me or tell me how to gain enlightenment. What I achieved I did by my own effort energy, knowledge and purity to gain supreme wisdom."

That is why he said that wisdom 'arose' in him at his enlightenment. Wisdom is latent in all of us. We only need to provide the right conditions for it to arise.

From the intellectual and philosophical content of Buddhism has arisen the freedom of thought, freedom of inquiry. This has no parallel in any of the established world religions. There is no obligation, no compulsion to believe or accept any doctrine.

The approach of Buddhism is one of seeing and understanding — it is a scientific attitude of mind. Fundamental philosophical doctrines taught in Buddhism are being more and more corroborated by new scientific discoveries. Buddhism advocates self-confidence, self restraint, self-reliance and self-purification to the individual in society.

A strong feature of Buddhism is the importance it attaches to democratic ideals. Unhindered discussions are encouraged, where even contrary views are aired and lead to broadening and enriching of the mind. The orders of monks and nuns are constituted entirely on these democratic principles.

This is in accordance with the Dharma revealed by the Supreme Buddha, who had the openness and courage to exhort his followers not even to accept what he himself had pronounced, without prior examination and conviction In fact, the Buddha had stated that the Dharma was his teacher and all he did was to reveal the truth of this universal Dharma, which had lain hidden from the people wallowing in their ignorance. We must give our minds the freedom to think without bias and to think independently.

Before his passing away the Buddha's final words were "Be a refuge unto yourselves. Why is it that after 45 years of preaching he uttered such words? Why did he not advise everyone to find salvation through him? What he meant was that we must not seek salvation by depending on others. We must develop our own confidence in ourselves. What wonderful and noble advice! You may perhaps now ask, 'Why do we say "*Buddham saranam gaccami*?" (I go to the Buddha for refuge?)

When we say this we do not mean that we depend on the Buddha. We mean that if we follow the Method taught by the Buddha we will develop the confidence to work out our own salvation. We certainly do not think that the Buddha will come one day and take us up to "heaven" in a glorious flight.

Some people say that the Buddha was only a human and not a god. Why should people follow him? They cannot understand that Buddhists do not expect their salvation directly from the Buddha but by practising the noble method taught by him. The Buddha's Method from the very beginning was to train us how to work for the development of self reliance by training our minds. Self effort and self-realisation is the only path to salvation.

Any one can stand before the Buddha with dignity and not be like a slave. With hope and confidence one can determine one's own fate. The Buddha will welcome you if you stand as a dignified human being. But you must be prepared to be reasonable and listen to sensible arguments which are contradictory to your beliefs and have right observation. This should be the attitude of understanding people. When he was about to pass away, many great people, princes, ministers and even divine beings came to pay homage to him with flowers, but the Buddha instructed his attendant Ananda to tell them that if anyone wanted to honour their master, they had to follow his teachings. This shows that he did not want personal glory for himself or demand total submission to his power.

Impartiality

After realising the truth, understanding people try to cultivate their minds to guard and protect themselves. They neither accept nor reject what is said by someone. Krishnamurti says that those who always depend on others' ideas are second class human beings. Don't accept or believe anything that is taught as religious practice and at the same time

don’t reject it outright either. Certain things that we accept as true, we may later discover to be untrue after all. Conversely, we may be forced to admit that certain things that we rejected at first may be true after all. That is why the Buddha has advised us to wait for a time and study, think, observe, investigate before we decide whether there is any truth in something we hear and whether to accept or to reject it. By relying on our emotions or blind faith or anxiety, we may accept certain things or even be sceptical. As a result of laziness or confusion of the mind we may reject or disbelieve something we hear. But we must give a chance for the mind to think and understand whether it is true or not.

Faith

Mere faith is meaningless because faith must be tempered with the understanding that comes from training the mind. The main purpose of a religion must be to show a follower how to use his knowledge with critical understanding to maximize his sense of well-being and self fulfilment. No matter how much knowledge we have, if we do not uproot defilements and doubt in our minds, we will remain in an unhappy state. When we attain the highest state of purity (*arahantahood*) we completely uproot our cravings, anger, delusion and establish total equanimity of the mind. It is then that the “pure ones” arrive at a state when they cannot create any bad thoughts. They cannot utter harsh words or commit evil actions. One who has purified his mind is a hundred times superior to those who are powerful or those who have mere faith or knowledge and wallow in the impurities of the mind. We claim to be “civilized”, but how can we claim this when our minds show impure traits to the same extent as our “primitive” ancestors did thousands of years ago?

All over the world people crowd in temples, churches, mosques and other places of worship to pray, do sacrifice, perform penance. But when they come out they have the same anger, craving, jealousy, grudges and enmity that they had before. People claim to be ‘religious’ when they pray and worship and perform religious ceremonies, but their MINDS remain selfish, and devious. If they are truly religious they will not discriminate against others, or hurt and ridicule others in their religious practices. The Buddha tried to open our minds to understand things perfectly without developing fanatical religious beliefs and discrimination.

Heresy

Another reason why the teaching of the Buddha does not fall into the category of an established religion is that there is no room for "heresy" in its system. A heresy is something that challenges the "word of god." The Buddha freely invited both his followers and his opponents to challenge his teachings from every possible angle so that there would be no room for any kind of doubt, True to his injunctions his followers have argued about his doctrines and even founded different schools of Buddhism according to their understanding, without violence or bloodshed. In fact at the famous Buddhist University of Nalanda (which was destroyed at the fanatical hands of other religionists), followers of Theravada and Mahayana schools of Buddhism lived together and studied and debated their different points of view in perfect harmony. The Buddha taught that if anyone really believed that he knew the truth, then he should not be afraid to have it challenged, because the truth will always win. Moreover, he actively encouraged anyone to challenge his teachings. His replies to numerous questions enriched the doctrine into a vast religious field which was faithfully recorded by his disciples. We are today able to answer any questions about Buddhism, simply by referring to the Buddha's explanations. Rational thinking and the importance of inviting criticism are paramount in Buddhism.

Science

The test of a religious teaching is in its conformity with the findings of science and the attraction it casts on the minds of persons possessed of acute intelligence. Some religions have experienced a measure of discomfort, as science unfolds its discoveries. As a result certain modifications or re-interpretations of their scriptures have become necessary. In this respect Buddhism, the rational teaching of the Enlightened One, faces no such embarrassment, as its basic principles are in close harmony with the findings of science. Let us study just one example.

In the light of the latest studies of the atom, the old concept of the world is radically changing, just as the concept of the atom itself is changing. There is no more matter as it was believed in the past: it has been reduced to energy, and even con-

cept of energy is disappearing gradually and the scientists themselves do not know what to call it. They are now coming to the conclusion that the atom is only a concept and by extension, that the world too is nothing but a conception. The more they make researches into the structure of the atom the more they seem to be convinced of this conclusion.

In Buddhism this theory was expounded sixteen centuries ago, if not earlier. In the 4th century A.C. the Buddhist philosopher, Asanga, developed a theory known as *Vijnapti-matra* or *Citta-matra*, based on the original Canonical texts which enunciate that this world is just a conception, just a thought, just an idea. In order to prove this theory, Asanga had to define the atom, and his definition, made sixteen hundred years ago, is still valid up to this day. The atom (*paramanu*) should be understood as not having a physical body (*nissarira*). The determination of the nature of the atom is done by the intellect through the ultimate analysis of the mass of matter. Of course, Asanga's interest was not in physics, but in the metaphysical and the philosophical. His interest was to show that this world, which ordinary people take as substance, was nothing real, but only a concept. According to Albert Einstein, when the universe is analysed there is nothing which remains as substance but only vibrations or waves.

The doctrine of Buddha Dharma stands today, as unaffected by the march of time and the expansion of knowledge as when it was first enunciated. No matter to what lengths increased scientific knowledge can extend man's mental horizon, within the framework of the Dharma there is room for the acceptance and assimilation of further discovery. This is because Buddhism does not rely for its appeal upon limited concepts of primitive minds nor for its power upon the negation of thought.

Miracles

Science today does not deny the possibility of miracles, as it once did, but is beginning to accept that what were known as miracles were but manifestations of phenomena as yet unknown. The Buddha himself expounded this view: to him miracles were not in themselves to be regarded as demonstration of truth, but showed only a mastery of little-known powers that may be developed by some people. It did not necessarily follow that their possessor was an enlightened or divine being.

This being so, the Buddha not only taught his followers to be wary in the exercise of any miraculous powers they might acquire, but also warned others not to be unduly impressed by such exhibitions. Thus, whereas other religions exploit their miraculous elements to the greatest possible extent in order to convince the masses, Buddhism treats all such things as of very minor importance and irrelevant to the real task of spiritual development and emancipation. According to the Buddha the highest miracle is the conversion of an ignorant man to become a wise man.

In this connection, Swami Vivekananda says, "*The idea of supernatural beings may arouse to a certain extent, the power of action in man, but it also brings dependence; it brings fear; it brings superstition. It degenerates into a horrible belief in the natural weakness of the man.*"

The scientific attitude and content of Buddhism has led Albert Einstein to say that "*if there is any religion that would cope with modern scientific needs it would be Buddhism.*"

Ethics and Society

The other important aspect of Buddhism as a world religion is its attitude to social, economic and political problems. Uninformed people have generally tended to consider this religion as an escape or withdrawal from active life, retiring into a temple, or into a cave or into a forest and leading a life cut off from society. This however, is due to a lack of understanding, for the Buddha himself was one of the hardest working persons that ever lived in this world. He slept only two and a half hours each night and the rest of the time he worked. He walked the length and breadth of India met people from all walks of life, talked to them and taught them. He did not talk about Nirvana all the time and to everybody he met. He spoke according to their way of life and levels of understanding. The Buddha said that he would not expect a beginner to realise the highest noble Truth at once. He said that his was a gradual path. Therefore helping people in various ways according to their standard or evolution and progress, is part of this religion. An active social, economic and political life cannot be separated from true religious life.

In the religion of the Buddha is to be found a comprehensive system of ethics, and a

transcendental metaphysics embracing a sublime psychology. It satisfies all temperaments. To the simple minded it offers a code of morality, a gorgeous worship and even a hope of life in heaven; to the earnest devotee, a system of pure thoughts, a lofty philosophy and moral teachings that lead to enlightenment and liberation from all sufferings. But the basic doctrine is the self-purification of man. Spiritual progress is impossible for him who does not lead a life of purity and compassion.

In its organised form, as a popularly practised religion of the masses, with the many ceremonies, processions and festivals incorporating various customs and traditions, Buddhism provides for ample motivation, experience and material for education. Family functions, village ceremonies, cultural performances and events like births, weddings, deaths and memorial services provide education in an informal way. Children learn most of their customs, manners, cultural, values and even aspirations by observing or participating in these non-formal educational activities. Youths and adults too gain from them.

Beyond the personal level and the emancipation of the individual, Buddhism recognises the family as a unit of society and nation. Thus to the ordinary house-holder whose highest aim consists in gaining material satisfaction here and going to heaven hereafter, Buddhism provides a simple code of morality — as contained in the Sigalovada Sutra — the practice of which will strengthen the solidarity of a community. It maintains the right relations between its family members, employers and employees.

In another discourse the Buddha has given ten kinds of advice for people to respect and to fulfil1 their duties and responsibilities towards their parents, children, husbands and wives, relatives, elders, their departed ones, devas (deities) and to live in harmony in society without becoming nuisances to the public and to lead blameless lives.

Such a teaching has the well-being of all members of a society as its aim and provides for diligent practice of friendly action which is the mark of a truly social being. On the other hand, the advanced person who realises the hindrances of the household life (a path defiled by passions), can resort to a higher code of morals and ethics, as contained in the rules of the Holy Order, known as the Vinaya. They will enable him to lead a life of purity, holiness and renunciation unfettered by mundane distractions.

Morality

Buddhist morality is based on freedom and understanding. Because morality grew out of society's need for self-preservation, it must necessarily adapt itself to changing times and circumstances. Morality is therefore relative. In fact there cannot be any morality or ethical concept if it is grounded in compulsion or interference from any agent outside the individual himself. The individual must agree freely to any restriction placed on him for morality to be truly effective.

Compassionate Love (*Metta*) is the basis of all moral and ethical conduct in Buddhism. Out of this compassion arises all ethical and moral precepts, social service, social justice, social welfare. Equality, brotherhood, tolerance, under-standing, respect for life, respect for others' views, respect for others' religions, all these have their roots in Compassionate Love. Based on this great noble principle, Buddhism has always been a religion of peace. Its long history is free from the taints of religious wars, religious persecutions and inquisi- tions. Buddhism in this respect stands unique in the history of religions. Of the Buddha's noble example in this matter, Swami Vivekananda says in his lectures on karmayoga: "*The whole human race has produced but one such person, such high philosophy, such wide sympathy. The great philosopher, preaching the highest philosophy, yet has the deepest sympathy for the lowest animals, and never puts forward a claim for himself. He is the ideal Karma Yogi, acting entirely without motive, and the history of humanity shows him to have been the greatest man ever born, beyond compare, the greatest combination of heart and brain that ever existed.*"

In respect to its social and moral code, the German philosopher, Prof. Max Muller has said, "*The Buddhist moral code taken by itself is one of the most perfect which the world has ever known .*"

On this point all testimonies from hostile and friendly quarters agree; philosophers there may have been, religious preachers, subtle metaphysic-ists, disputants there may have been, but where shall we find such an incarnation of love, love that knows no distinction of caste and creed or colour, a love that overflowed even the bounds of humanity, that embraced the whole of sentient beings in its sweep, a love that embodied the gospel of universal loving-kindness (*Metta*) and non-injury (*Ahimsa*) ?

Albert Schweitzer says, "*In this sphere, the Buddha gave expression to truths of everlasting value*

and advanced the ethics not of India alone but of humanity. The Buddha was one of the greatest ethical men of genius ever bestowed upon the world."

Furthermore, Prof. Rhys Davids observed that the study of Buddhism should be considered a necessary part of any ethical course and should not be dismissed in a page or two but receive its due recognition in the historical perspective of ethical evolution.

Economic Development

Within a Buddhist framework, the possibility of economic development on a dynamic and meaningful basis is receiving greater attention in the more affluent as well as in the developing countries. Modern development theory has failed to grapple with the increasing environmental and social problems in most developed societies and Buddhism offers a way out of this impasse.

The Cakkavatti Sihanada Sutra in the Digha Nikaya clearly states that poverty is the cause of crime and immorality. The Buddha and his disciples taught the people the value of earning wealth and the importance of economic development for their well-being and happiness. In the Kutadanta Sutra (in the Digha Nikaya) the Buddha also expounded that crimes such as stealing could not be stopped by punishment. For such crimes to be adequately and properly controlled and stopped, opportunities should be provided for the people to be happily engaged in their occupations to enable them to lead comfortable lives.

- Economic security (*atthi-sukha*)
- enjoyment of wealth (*bhoga-sukha*)
- freedom from debts (*anana-sukha*)
- leading a faultless life (*anavajja-sukha*):

these are four kinds of happiness for a layman. Ability in one's occupation (*utthana sampada*), protection of wealth (*arakkha sampada*), association with good friends (*kalyana mittata*), expenditure in proportion to income (*sama jivikata*): these four are said to be conducive to the well-being of people in this world.

Many ideas for the advancement of society, as well as duties and obligations both by the family and the society for their mutual benefit, are mentioned in the discourses such as the Sigalovada, Parabhava and Vasala Sutras.

It is evident from the Dhammapada commentary that the Buddha directed his attention even towards the serious problem of government through compassion (*karuna*), with a view to promoting a form of justice that would not harm and hurt the people. Justice should prevent suffering under the tyranny and the heavy taxes imposed on them by unrighteous rulers.

Buddhism teaches that a country should be governed in accordance with the Ten Duties of the King (*dasa raja dharma*), namely:

- liberality (*dana*)
- morality (*sila*)
- giving everything for the good of the people (*pariccaga*)
- honesty and integrity (*ajjava*)
- kindness and gentleness (*madduva*)
- austerity in habits (*tapa*)
- freedom from hatred, ill-will, enmity (*akkodha*)
- non-violence (*avihimsa*)
- patience, forbearance, tolerance, understanding (*khanti*), and non-opposition, non-obstruction, i.e. not to obstruct any measures conducive to the welfare of the people (*avirodha*).

In this way the Buddha and his disciples taught such important ideas pertaining to health, sanitation, earning wealth, mutual relationships, well-being of society, and righteous government — all for the good of the people.

Madame H.P. Blavatsky, President of the Theosophical Society at the end of 18th century said, "*The Buddha was the first to embody these lofty ethics in his public teachings and to make them the foundation and the very essence of his public system. It is herein that lies the immense difference between exoteric Buddhism and every other religion. For while in other religions ritualism and dogma hold the first and most important place, in Buddhism it is the ethics which have always been the most insisted upon.*"

Government

Even the parliamentary system of today bears strong resemblance to the practices known in Buddhism. As the Marquess of Zetland, a former Viceroy of India, reveals: *"It is indeed to the Buddhist books that we have to turn for an account of the manner in which the affairs of the early examples of representative self-governing institutions were conducted. And it may come us a surprise to many to learn that in the assemblies of Buddhists in India 2500 years and more ago are to be found the rudiments of our own parliamentary practice of the present day. The dignity of the assembly was preserved by the appointment of a special officer — the embryo of Mr. Speaker in our house of commons. A second officer was appointed to see that when necessary a quorum was secured — the prototype of the Parliamentary Chief Whip in our own system. A member initiating business did so in the form of a motion which was then open to discussion. In some cases, this was done once only, in others three times, thus anticipating the practice of Parliament in requiring that a bill be read a third time before it becomes law. If discussion disclosed a difference of opinion the matter was decided upon by the vote of the majority, the voting being by ballot."*

Happiness

This is not a religion for people just to follow but to learn, understand, and to practise to gain experience and bliss.

One day while the Buddha was walking in the forest, he took a handful of leaves and declared that what he had taught was like those leaves in his hand. The Dhamma in its entirety was like all the leaves in the whole forest. The Dhamma is so unimaginably vast that the Buddha taught only the essentials that were necessary for the immediate task at hand, namely, to end suffering and gain liberation. The Buddha told us how to rid ourselves of this suffering. The rest of worldly knowledge is not important. Due to ignorance, we spend whole lifetimes trying to cope with suffering, worries, grievances and conflicts. This is because we do not understand the true nature of existence and the causes of suffering. For example, let us take the three characteristics of Impermanence (*Anicca*), Unsatisfactoriness (*Dukkha*), and Insubstantiality (*Anatta*). The whole of the Universe shares these characteristics. No power can arrest the process of change which is present from the moment we are born, and therein lies the cause of suffering. We

need little else to convince us about the root problems of suffering.

What do we want out of life? How can we gain happiness? Unsatisfactoriness and consequently unhappiness comes from our not realizing that everything is changeable and subject to decay. This is the universal law. But due to our ignorance and erroneous belief in a self we want to keep living in a permanent state without ever changing. This can never happen. We want to keep our wealth, our property, our health, our youth. But one day all of these can be swept away just like the flame of a candle being snuffed out by the wind. When we notice that our beautiful good looks are being replaced by wrinkles and white hair we worry and become unhappy because we refuse to accept the changing nature of things.

The Buddha teaches us to contemplate on these matters so that we will understand and remove the source of our unhappiness. The teaching of the Buddha has illuminated the way for mankind to cross from a world blinded by superstition, hatred and fear and reach a new world of light, love, happiness and dignity. Sir Edwin Arnold described the Buddha in this way, in his poem "*Light of Asia*."

"This is the blossom on our human tree
Which opens in many a myriad years
But opened, fills the world
with wisdom's scent
and love's dropped honey."

Impermanence and Death

When we are young we must consider that although we are young, in time we will grow old. When we are healthy we must think that in time we can fall sick. Health is not permanent. When we prepare ourselves wisely for decay, ageing, sickness and finally death, it will not be nearly as difficult to bear. Understanding that these are worldly conditions which everyone has to face, we can bear any suffering with fortitude. This is the strength, the 'refuge' that the Buddha promises. There are those who grumble and cry when misfortune hits them. This is nothing but lack of understanding. Moaning about it will not make the suffering go away.

To avoid the pain that misfortune can bring we must strengthen our minds through understanding.

There is nothing or nobody who has come into existence who can escape the natural process of

"coming to an end." There has to be an end. Otherwise things cannot exist. We need not be afraid of this perfectly natural phenomenon. We can all consider that even at death it is not the end of life but only the beginning of another. We know with the poet Wordsworth that, "The soul that rises with us, our life's star, has elsewhere had its setting, cometh from afar." When we disappear from this world physically, the life appears elsewhere — so why worry? Aren't we simply getting a new passport in our journey through Samsara?

Nations grow and die out; empires arise and fall apart; mighty palaces are built and crumble in the dust — such is the way of the world. Beautiful flowers blossom and attract all who pass by; but the next day they fade and dry up. Their petals all drop one by one and soon they are forgotten altogether. All enjoyments and high attainments of the world are only a momentary show. One who takes pleasure in them has to lament and weep when they are lost, and undergoes much suffering. Since nothing lasts in this world one should not hope to get ultimate happiness from it. The Buddha's advice is to contemplate on this transitoriness of the world and the various forms of unsatisfactoriness latent in all existing worldly phenomena.

This world, the sun, the moon, galaxies, the universe itself are all subject to the same inexorable law of impermanence.

If we follow the teachings of the Buddha we will not be upset at the prospect of separating from loved ones, property and wealth. This does not mean Buddhists must not experience worldly pleasure. We must follow the Middle Path. We can gain pleasures in moderation, without violating moral principles, without becoming slaves to them but with the understanding that this must not hinder spiritual development.

Husbands and wives, parents and children develop strong attachments to each other, This is perfectly natural. It is important for them in order to lead a worldly life. At the same time however, we must face the fact that this same attachment is the source of enormous pain and suffering. It can even lead to suicide. To eradicate problems, attachment must be allowed to develop with understanding. It is one's duty to develop affections by knowing that one day there will be separation. Under that condition one will know how to cope with separation when it happens. One will avoid madness and suicide simply because one has trained one's mind.

What the Buddha contributed to mankind was to console us by helping us to realize how all our problems arise and how to face them. Praying to external forces may lead to temporary solutions and provide transient moments of peace. But it is just like taking two painkillers when you have a headache. After three hours the pain will come back because the headache is not the sickness but merely its symptom. Painkillers are not the medicine for sickness. Those who understand are in a position to remove the cause of suffering. The Buddha's teaching gives us that understanding.

Conclusion

1 hope this introduction has shown you how Buddhism stands alone as a system of religious practice. The Buddha was a great and effective Teacher and Physician. He constantly reminded his followers that his only aim was to teach people how to understand the nature of suffering or unsatisfactoriness and how to eradicate it. He promised happiness in this very life for those who follow his noble method with determination and right understanding.

It is very unfortunate that in many existing religions the followers are not encouraged to respect the leaders of another religion. They are warned that if they do so they would be committing a sin and even worse, they would go to hell for it. The Buddha clearly tells us that we must respect those who are worthy of respect. Although we may not agree with certain religious points of view they hold, if they are sincere in their efforts to serve humanity and uplift it, we must respect them for it. There are noble people in every religion.

The Buddha did not advise his disciples to go and convert people who would otherwise go to hell. Rather he advised them to show the world what is right and what is wrong and to be good and to do good, to encourage men to come and see for themselves the truth that he taught.

He and his followers do not condemn the followers of other religionists as "sinners" who are doomed to spend an eternity in hell. According to Buddhists, even those who have no "religion" but who live in dignity, with compassion and goodwill can "go to heaven", that is, experience happiness.

When we are happy and contented we are in "heaven." When we suffer physically or mentally

we are in “hell.” There is no need to wait to die to experience either of these states.

Buddhism is unique because we can talk about this “religion” even without any reference to heaven or hell. I am sure that others cannot talk about religion in this way.

The Buddha’s message of goodwill and understanding to all beings is a universal message. The world today needs this noble message more than ever before in the history of humankind.

Buddhism as a religion is the unique exposition of the absolute truth which will show man how to live in peace and harmony with his fellow beings.

